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Homeless data begin to roll in

BY LORA HINES
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Preliminary census information released Wednesday indicates that Riverside County's homeless population dropped slightly over the past two years.

An analysis of the information by the county's Department of Public Social Services has not been completed, said Susan Loew, the department's assistant director of administration. The analysis is to be finished by summer, Loew said.

"Are we seeing changes of demographics? Are we seeing a shift of homeless from community to community? Those are the kinds of questions we can't answer yet," she said.

The department found there now are 4,508 homeless people, compared with 4,785 in 2005. On Jan. 24, 200 volunteers conducted the federally mandated census.

San Bernardino County conducted its homeless survey Feb. 27. Details won't be available until June, said Rowena Concepcion of the nonprofit Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County. The county's last census, conducted in 2002, counted as many as 8,351 homeless people.

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The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires local governments every two years to determine the number of men, women and children living on sidewalks, and in cars, abandoned buildings and emergency shelters.

The information collected from the census helps local governments justify requests for services and better tailor programs for the homeless, Loew said.

"The information shows there still is a need for more housing in the county," she said.

Last year, the Department of Public Social Services received more than \$6 million from HUD to fund housing projects. It probably will submit another request as soon as next month, Loew said.

Meanwhile, the Fair Housing Council of Riverside County has helped at least 100 people find housing, Executive Director Rose Mayes said.

The council provides grants for tenants who need help paying rent and deposits, she said. Some participants have received as much as \$3,000.

"Many times, they have been refused housing because of past problems," Mayes said. "We work directly with the landlord. The money goes straight to the landlord."

In exchange for grants, tenants must complete budgeting classes to learn how to manage money better. So far, two people have failed to complete the program, which is funded by a HUD grant, Mayes said.

"They are the ones who are not truly sincere about finding a place to live," she said.

Mayes said she talked to Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster about the need for more money to help county residents.

Buster could not be reached Wednesday.

Waudiecur "Woodie" Rucker-Hughes, homeless liaison for the Riverside Unified School District, said records show that the number of homeless students has dropped to 929 from almost 1,130. But she doubts the accuracy of the numbers because some students don't report they are homeless, she said.

"It's still a problem," Rucker-Hughes said. "What the number says to me is some people are getting into housing. There's still a lot of movement."

She said some homeless people tend to move away, return and leave again.

"I had a student like that (Wednesday)," Rucker-Hughes said. "He left in March of 2006. He came back in February. And I found out he's gone again. He and his momma are out in the street some place."

Reach Lora Hines at 951-368-9444 or at lhines@PE.com